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The Director of Central Intelligence  
Washington, D.C. 20505

NIC 01799-85  
4 April 1985

National Intelligence Council

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Graham E. Fuller  
National Intelligence Officer for NESA

SUBJECT: Iranian Politics

1. We are moving toward an extremely delicate and complex phase of Iranian politics. It could represent a turning point for US interests--for better or for worse. As Khomeini's grip loosens and Iran's economic problems increase, factionalism is growing and the war continues to be a losing prospect for Iran--all heightening the chances for evolving chaos or even some sort of dramatic change. If Khomeini were to die soon, the most probable scenario for succession would still involve the emergence of a strong clerical figure or someone with strong military or Revolutionary Guard backing close to the clerics. The longer Khomeini moves towards a prolonged half life, however, the messier the struggle for succession becomes. The messier the transition, the broader the opportunities are for other non-clerical actors to play a role.

-- The two key actors largely excluded at present are the left--represented by the Mujahedin-e-khalq and the Tudeh Party--and the regular military whose loyalties we know very little about. The Mujahedin-e-khalq are the strongest native leftist tradition in Iran and although badly bruised, must still command potentially significant support. While this group has never shown much willingness to cooperate with the USSR, its leftist/Marxist outlook could make it much easier for the Soviets to deal with.

2. 1979 All Over Again? As the radical clergy watches Khomeini's grip lessening and unrest growing, it will be nervous about its own future--especially in view of some of the support which Khomeini has lent to the more moderate elements in the past several months--despite his continued support for the war.

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- There is a distinct possibility that the radical clergy may seek to replay the hostage crisis of 1979 in which, by a broad attack upon the US, they were able to galvanize Iranian internal politics, displace the moderates, and seize power. Might the radical clergy not seek direct attack upon American interests once again--perhaps in the very expectation that the US might strike back at Iranian territory proper, thereby polarizing the internal power struggle and strengthening the radicals?

3. Who Gets to Tehran First? The respective positions of the USSR and the US in the Iran-Iraq war are particularly anomalous. Rarely do the US and the Soviet Union end up--even for tactical reasons--on the same side of a major international conflict where the stakes are so high. Yet we are both on Iraq's side--because we are both excluded from Iran. But it is only a matter of time before one or the other of us finds the opening it seeks in Iran.

4. The USSR will need to calculate very carefully the exact combination of carrot and stick it wishes to employ with Iran. The Soviets are largely in a stick phase at present (whereas the first two years of the Iranian Revolution belonged more to the carrot phase). Moscow probably calculates that as long as the US is excluded from any foothold in Iran, the USSR can fairly safely play the squeeze game against Iran. The object would be to soften Iran up sufficiently--under military pressure from Iraq--until the clergy crumbles or comes to terms with the USSR, either to gain arms, to secure some relief from Iraq, or even to get Moscow's assistance in a peace settlement.

- Moscow's involvement in a peace settlement is probably less likely since Iran does not need anyone to intercede for it in Baghdad. Iran itself is the holdout. Tehran would furthermore much prefer an Islamic intermediary such as Algeria or Pakistan than it would a Soviet.

5. I would guess the Soviets are best served by allowing the clerical regime to continue to crumble until the situation is open enough for the other Iranian actors described above to play a role. Despite growing restiveness in Iran we are not yet in that stage--but that stage could come more swiftly than we realize.

6. The US faces a serious dilemma: the actions of Iranian radicals may compel the US to treat very roughly a regime which could collapse, possibly opening the way to a slide to the left and a major Soviet gain. We will have to balance the costs of defending US credibility and commitment in the face of terrorist attack against the broader geostrategic gains to be won or lost for influence in Iran.

  Graham E. Fuller 

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